

Finding Nature: An Exploration in Ceramic Art

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Abstract

From the microscopic world to the visible, nature's beautiful patterns are everywhere, and our inherent fascination and exaltation of these patterns can teach us to value our environment. Living in the 21st Century, we are increasingly disconnected from the natural world, with fewer opportunities to experience the myriad of patterns in nature directly. As a result, we fail to develop an understanding of and appreciation for the complexity and inherent worth of the world around us. This body of work seeks to challenge perceptual habits and preconceptions, inviting viewers to interact with intricate patterns found in the environment and become enamored with the unique interlocking patterns of living creatures. Nature is strong, yet fragile, and ceramics is a medium that mirrors this duality. Each intricate ceramic sculpture is handbuilt using highly decorative techniques and inspired by the micro-patterns found in natural structures, from botanicals to oceanic creatures. Small clay elements are used to create the sculptures' forms, and delicate pieces are repetitively and painstakingly assembled to remind viewers that even large structures, like coral reefs, are made of many smaller components. By bringing beauty into people's lives, art that focuses on the environment can create emotive experiences within the viewer that scientific data often cannot; and by depicting beauty in the environment through ceramics sculptures, the viewer is inspired to look more deeply at the dimensional world around them. In being awed by the delicate beauty of the natural world, one can begin to feel empowered to care for it.

1. Introduction

Elements from nature can serve as metaphors for a way to look at life. The great 13th-century poet, Rumi, once wrote, "Everything that is made beautiful and fair and lovely is made for the eyes of one who sees." His words strongly resonate with me and exemplify how appreciating nature and its patterns can enhance our ability to enjoy life. My sense of living and seeing has been enhanced by close observation of the natural world, thanks to my education in environmental science. It has taught me how to look closer at what is around us. For example, when looking at a lush field of wildflowers, I once only saw a world of color. However, with a trained eye, I can notice that all these flowers do not look the same—that they are, in fact, different species. I can see how rays of sunlight create a contrast of light and shadows that enhance the brilliancy of each form. And I can notice the interactions within nature, as in the flies and bees carefully pollinating the flowers' centers.

As our world confronts the unprecedented challenges of climate change and loss of biodiversity, there is a growing need to generate discussion and solutions to problems that impact every part of the planet. Artists have an important role to play in these unprecedented times. As a society, we need to improve environmental education and develop a focus on conservation and restoration.¹ In order to shift environmental values, it is vital to create a space for people and nature to connect, and art has the power to shift people's values.² The increased discussion of ecological challenges to our existence is naturally becoming an important topic in contemporary art, and my work seeks to contribute to this field.

Through my artwork, this collection of forms will explore flora and fauna and life cycles to convey allegories about beauty, nature, and transience. Using clay, I solidify the ephemeral states of living organisms to illustrate new perspectives of beauty and appreciation for the natural world. I bring my thoughts and ideas into physical objects for others to touch and see, hoping to foster an emotional connection between the viewer and nature. I chose ceramics for its long and rich history. As an art medium, it is organic and seen as mundane, both characteristics allow people to easily connect to it. And clay is paradoxically fragile. When wet, it is incredibly malleable, and as it dries, it becomes exceptionally delicate; yet once fired, it can be forever unchanged. These ceramic sculptures are meant to show the natural world's beautiful patterns, the intrinsic value conveyed by its aesthetic power, and to invoke a sense of care leading to the question: why we should protect it? Answer this question will be crucial for our future as we attempt to challenge the rampant scourge of climate change, which is jeopardizing the existence of many flora and fauna.

2. Research: The Representation of Nature in Art History

Throughout my development as an artist, I have taken influences from many artistic movements from different cultures across history. These movements represent a wide range of styles, cultural influences, purposes, and philosophical and moral concerns, but they have at least one aspect in common: they capture a pervasive, perennial fascination with the natural world as the subject matter of their work.

2.1 Japanese Art: Kutani Ware and Its Use of Nature Motifs

Japanese ceramic art has a long, rich history of drawing inspiration from nature. During the 17th century, Kutani Ware focused on nature with an emphasis on flowers; this branch of Kutani was specifically known as Hanazume, which means "packed florals." Art historians speculate that this ceramic art movement only lasted for 50 years due to trade and business difficulties but its legacy still lives on today. Hanazume is known for its botanical patterns embellished in dense decorative forms and the use of bright colors and hints of gold luster. These abstracted, colorful representations of nature depict scenes such as blooming flowers found in springtime, in order to bring the beauty of nature into the home and enrich people's lives (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. *Kutani Vase*, Artist Unknown, 17th century, porcelain
<https://library-artstor-org.proxy177.nclive.org/#/asset/24590358>

2.2 Floral Decorative Art Within The Dutch Golden Age

On roughly the same timeline as Japanese Kutani Ware, the floral Still Life genre had developed in Europe and become one of the most popular artistic themes of 17th century Holland. This art period became known as the Dutch Golden Age, also known as the Dutch-Flemish Period. The Dutch-Flemish still life paintings emphasized both aesthetic and decorative functions of art, and used the natural world as its main source of inspiration. Like Kutani Ware, a primary objective of the floral still life genre was to bring nature into people's lives and make floral imagery a central theme for interior decoration, scientific investigation, botanical references, and representations of the beauty and ephemerality of life. Prints of Dutch-Flemish floral art, such as *Still life with flowers and fruit* (figure 2), made these works more portable and affordable, and thus accessible to many from across Europe, even to the American colonies as well.



Figure 2. *Still Life with flowers and fruit*, Johann Peter Pichleer (after Jan van Huysum), 1765, Mezzotints on paper <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/sites/default/files/styles/postcard/public/externals/139584.jpg?itok=HSqw6huL>

2.3 Enchanting Natural Forms within Rococo Decorative Art

The Rococo style of art centered around nature-themes as well, utilizing motifs of detailed botanical ornamentation, serpentine lines, organic shapes, and soft color palettes. Asymmetrical forms from nature within decorative arts became one of the most distinguishing elements of this time period, drawing inspiration from marine and botanical forms such as seashells, leaves, and flowers. An excellent example of these design principles is found within the artwork *Inkstand in the form of a pomegranate* (see figure 3). During Rococo, decorative artists gained access to porcelain production in Europe for the first time. Naturally, these ceramicists drew inspiration from Chinese and Japanese porcelain pottery forms, seen in the increased use of bright colors and organic forms (as seen in Kutani ware). Although there are underlying similarities between European and East Asian aesthetics, Rococo artists differentiated themselves by seeking to create unusual nature forms that had strange and fantastical elements, as is exemplified in *Inkstand in the form of a Pomegranate*.



Figure 3. *Inkstand in the form of a pomegranate in a gilt-bronze mount*, Artist Unknown, porcelain ca. 1735, mounts ca. <https://collectionapi.metmuseum.org/api/collection/v1/iiif/824691/1984637/main-image>

2.4 Ernst Haeckel and His Direct Influence on the Decorative Artists from the Art Nouveau Movement

Like Rococo artists, Ernst Haeckel was also fascinated by fantastical forms found within nature. In the late 19th century, art became an essential tool for scientists like Ernst Haeckel to describe the natural world. Haeckel devoted his life to zoological studies by rendering his findings in beautiful illustrations that revealed microscopic life forms and the incredible intricacies of natural forms that inhabit the Earth. After creating an array of artworks, he published *Kunstformen der Natur* (*Art Forms In Nature*), which quickly influenced many artists and architects of the era. His legendary portfolio is still relevant today within the scientific and artistic community, and his work directly inspired the Art Nouveau movement.

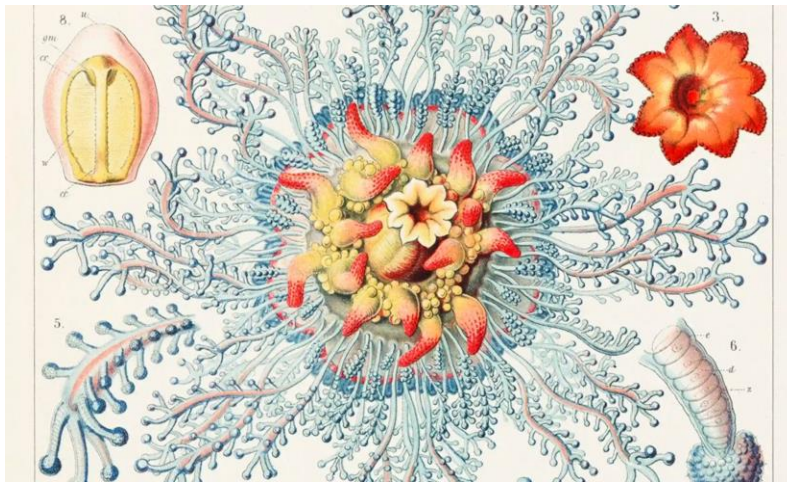


Figure 4. *Detail from plate 50 on Siphonophorae*, Ernst Haeckel, print, 1888

https://i.guim.co.uk/img/media/0ca5ff293cca2fc9fce6d2dbd3e92bb5ab86ff49/0_0_960_1374/master/960.jpg?width=880&quality=45&auto=format&fit=max&dpr=2&s=bde3abd655ed7bde5b09eec35e885e53

Towards the end of the 19th century, rapid industrialization caused a reversion in technology and industry, which was the catalyst that pushed the art movement of Art Nouveau. Art Nouveau artists longed for a reconnection to nature within their culture, and so these artists, from decorative artists to architects, looked to the natural world to inspire their art and design. *Kunstformen der Natur* played an integral role for renowned decorative artists of the time like Rene Lalique, who often referred to Haeckel's work for inspiration (see figure 5).



Figure 5. *Jewel (Broche)*, Rene Lalique, glass, 1903

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/a/a2/Ren%C3%A9_lalique%2C_spilla_a_papavero%2C_oro%2C_argento%2C_diamanti_e_smalti%2C_1897.JPG/2560px-Ren%C3%A9_lalique%2C_spilla_a_papavero%2C_oro%2C_argento%2C_diamanti_e_smalti%2C_1897.JPG?20160305172213

3. Research: Contemporary Influences

During the development of this body of work, it has been crucial to look at art that centers around representations of nature, from ancient ceramic vessels to nature illustrations and contemporary ceramic works. Art centered around the natural world effectively expresses the narrative that the world is a beautiful, wondrous place worth protecting.

For example, the mixed-media artist and ceramicist Elaine Quave embeds highly narrative messages of extinction within her ceramic forms, such as *Tropical Milkweed I*. She uses a limited range of colors—usually small amounts of bright colors, like red—that contrast on stark white porcelain, which conveys a sense of sterility, a sense of the draining away of the vibrance of nature. The presence of human bones in her work invites people to further think about the destructive behavior humanity is wreaking on the natural world. Similarly, Courtney Mattison uses ceramic art to illustrate coral reef conservation, sharing stories from scientific data and personal experiences like *Our Changing Seas*. She expresses an interest in art that intersects with science, which I mirror in my own work.



Figure 6. Elaine Quave, *Tropical Milkweed I*, 2013, porcelain, stoneware, earthenware, steel
<http://www.elainequave.com/Tropical-Milkweed--III-View-1.gif>



Figure 7. Courtney Mattison, *Our Changing Seas IV*, 2019, glazed stoneware and porcelain
https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/54ed5a7be4b032e808a4a028/1551159522641-LIPI27SSJHTMDQS1VM5M/MG_0067.jpg?format=1500w

Additionally, in developing my sculptural style, I have looked at other artists who focus on the appreciation of natural forms and patterns, such as Junko Mori. Mori creates a marvelous sense of rhythm within her art, using multiple patterns to create a harmonious blend of unity and contrast. Her work features designs that induce a sense of movement that make her botanical sculptures look as though they are alive. Mori uses traditional craftsmanship techniques of welding to create unique, beautiful works of art unlike any I've seen. Although our medium choices are different, I feel a connection to her. In my work, I use a ceramic wheel and handbuilding as a tool to create most of my sculptural work. There is something exciting about taking a traditional craftsman technique and translating these skills into contemporary fine art. As an artist, she strives to share the intricate beauty of the natural world, including the microscopic world, and I take after that goal in my own art.



Figure 8. Junko Mori, *Conch*, 2019, forged steel

https://www.adriansassoon.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/JM740.mori_sassoon_1_ws-1024x1024.webp

Zemer Peled's work is similar to Junko Mori's, but she focuses on the duality of beauty and brutality in nature. One of her unique qualities is her technique: she takes thousands of porcelain shards, glazes them, and fires them. Then she rips them off the stilts they were fired upon, using a hammer or her bare hands. After each shard is removed, she then attaches the fragments to her wet clay form. Like Zemer, I am deeply inspired by the natural world and the way natural structures lend themselves to repetition, texture, and movement. While Junko Mori's work features monochromatic colors, Zemer Peled uses explosive colors. From hand-painted underglazes, Zemer creates dramatic line patterns in her work.

All of these sculptors use color to great effect for their narrative imagery, and I look to their expertise while continuing to develop my own body of work knowing that color can assist in creating certain emotional responses of viewers.

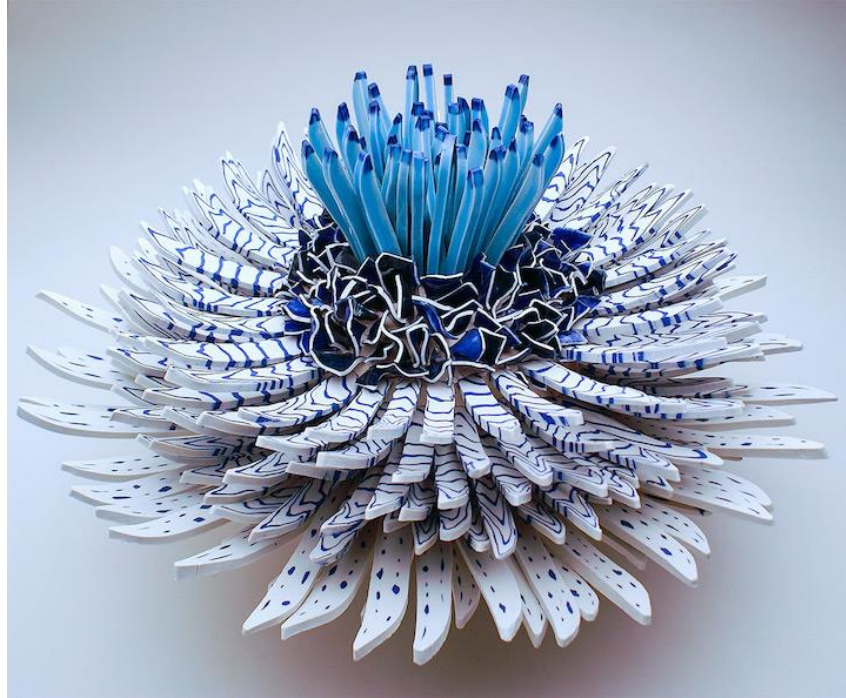


Figure 9. Zemer Peled, *Deadly Flower*, 2015, porcelain shards, fired clay
https://mymodernmet.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/archive/VyOba4hwFkHZZAmFM1bf_zemerpeled14.jpg

4. Methods

In my ceramic artwork, I use clay to share my close observations and strong feelings about the natural world. I am a double major in fine art and environmental sciences, and both concentrations intersect to inform my work. Having expertise in both art and science has trained me to see the world in more detail, to notice its small component parts and how they arrange themselves into repetitive patterns to create nature's forms. As a ceramicist, I first began my creative endeavors in pottery, and now I consider myself a sculptor. However, regardless of my media or methods, I find myself constantly returning to, and contemplating, the functionality of patterns and designs within nature, and how these designs invoke a sense of wonder in those who observe them. I often incorporate spheres into my work, because many living beings in nature utilize a sphere—an inherently beautiful shape, one that encloses the largest volume with the least surface area while being the most symmetric object of which one could ever conceive (figure 10). Primarily using terracotta and porcelain as an acknowledgment of their rich history in the decorative arts, I attempt to commemorate nature's intricacy and majesty by inviting the viewer to focus on the construction of its forms out of increasingly sub-divided patterns.



Figure 10. Madison Carson, *A Pollen Grain*, 2021, handbuilt, porcelain, fired to cone 04.

I also create other organic forms with repetitive textures and handbuilt components to explore the idea of 'horror vacui', which stems from Aristotle's philosophy that "nature abhors empty spaces." Within the natural world, space is typically utilized to the maximum, especially within botanical forms, and this maximalist use of space is illustrated in my work *Abloom* (Figure 10). For this work, I also drew influences from Kutani, Dutch-Flemish Floral paintings, and Rococo by utilizing botanical motifs as well as a bright, natural color palette.



Figure 10. Madison Carson, *Abloom*, 2021, earthenware, thrown and handbuilt with painted underglazes, 04 electric firing.

In other works, I have been focused on combining botanical elements and marine life to convey the impermanence and fragility of nature. The white finish of *What Remains* (Figure 11) is meant to indicate sterility and the loss of vitality, mirroring coral bleaching in the oceans, where coral reefs once known for their bright variety of colors are now dying due to pollution and climate change.⁵ While *What Remains* is a work that discusses the degradation of the coral reefs⁶, it also, like most of my work, captures an ecosystem that is comprised of many smaller parts.



Figure 11. Madison Carson, *What Remains*, 2021, earthenware, handbuilt, 04 electric firing.

My interests in the decorative art movements, particularly Rococo and Art Nouveau, have inspired me to focus on details and ornamentation within my hand built sculptures (figures 12 and 13), while also continuing to explore ideas of beauty, ecosystems, growth, and decay. Both Rococo and Art Nouveau used an array of beautiful glossy glazes;

however, I have found that by leaving some of my sculptures unglazed, the details that I have created are more immediate and observable to the viewer than they would be if covered in glaze decoration. In the work, *Efflorescence* (Figure 12), I utilized porcelain and nichrome wire to create a layered effect and sense of movement within the work to show the dynamic beauty of nature's organisms. *Efflorescence* is a work that is more light and playful, mainly focusing on pure beauty, while my work *Parasite* (Figure 13), using similar building techniques, seeks to convey a sense of unpleasantness. In nature, degradation and predatory consumption of organisms are prevalent, and so in this work, I wished to create a piece narrating the jarring conflict between growth and decay, life and death. My hope is that the juxtaposition of each artwork reflects a duality and the conflicts found within the natural world.



Figure 12. Madison Carson, *Efflorescence*, 2021, porcelain with nichrome wire elements, handbuilt and fired to cone 6 in electric kiln



13. Madison Carson, *Parasite*, 2021, stoneware, handbuilt and electric fired to cone 04

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, clay is a versatile and beautiful medium for conveying the tendency of nature's forms to consist of repeating patterns of small building blocks, knitted together to create larger structures. I have found working in clay to be a superlative method for getting at the natural, sometimes terrible beauty of the world and the fragility of its environments. In *Finding Nature*, my sculptures link my interests in art and science by referencing historical art imagery and contemporary influences. Ceramics as a medium further supports my concepts with its innate qualities: e.g. its inherent delicacy reflects the natural world's fragile beauty, strength, and impermanence. I hope that the ceramic sculptures in this collection of work will reshape people's preconceptions of how they view the natural world, and they will be inspired to find and appreciate the beautiful complexities of the flora and fauna all around them.

6. Acknowledgments

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7. Endnotes

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